

RELIGION, CULTURE, AND THE MONSTROUS

OF GODS AND MONSTERS



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Chapter 9

Man, Yeti, and Mi-go

The Transgressive History of a Monstrous Word

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In Lobsang Rampa's second book *Doctor from Lhasa*, published in 1959, the self-described lama—by his own account trained in Tibetan medicine, aviation, and trepanation—bemoans the destructive character of Western academic and scientific skepticism:

What would happen to my old friends, the yetis, if the westerners got hold of them—as they are yet trying to do. Undoubtedly the yeti would be shot, stuffed, and put in some museum. Even then people would argue and say there were no such things as yetis. (Rampa 1990, 1)

It is worth noting that Lama Rampa, or Cyril Henry Hoskin, a plumber from Devon, likely never actually set foot in Tibet, and was probably not friends with any yetis. Belief in the yeti, however, is historically and geographically widespread throughout the Himalayas (Vleck 1964, 80–4), with regional gazetteers (Nag chu sa gnas srid gros 1992) and descriptions of mythical hidden-lands (Bkra shis tse ring 2008) warning of yeti and other wild animals harassing potential travelers. Another name for this monster, which occurs somewhat less frequently in Western sources is “mi-go” (*Tib. Mi-rgod*), which *The Tibetan-English Dictionary of Tibetan Medicine and Astrology* translates as “Wild and savage people” and as “raw, courageous men” (2006, 328). *Mi* is the Tibetan word for human, while the suffix *go* means wild and undomesticated.

The word first appears in the West alongside the accounts of mountaineers returning from Himalayan expeditions in the early twentieth century claiming to have seen inexplicable footprints, and heard stories about a

mountain-dwelling man-like monster (Sawerthal 2017, 124–5). One early, and especially enduring, use of the word *mi-go* in the West occurs in the writings of horror author H. P. Lovecraft. In “Whisperer in the Darkness,” published in 1930 Lovecraft (2010, 672) equates satyrs and wildmen with “the dreaded *Mi-Go* or ‘Abominable Snow-Men’ who lurk hideously amid the ice and rock pinnacles of the Himalayan summits.”

The word occurs again in the poet and mountaineer Michael Roberts’s 1937 poem *The Mi-go*. Robert’s poetry was inspired by folktales exchanged by his Sherpa guides and attendants, who, he writes, “swore that they had seen them, white skinned and naked, but covered with thick hair.” The first line of the poem reads: “Bind Jealousy and War, punish Greed, Torment your hideous Caliban and bind him, or send him, a puzzled scapegoat, to the outer darkness” (Roberts 1937, 193). These references to binding and to Caliban, the wildman of Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, are particularly interesting given the material covered below.

The doctor Reuchung Rinpoche (1976, 165) translates *mi-go* into English as “Ape-man,” while medical texts translated and analyzed below provide descriptions and illustrations of *mi-go* (alongside conventional apes and primates) that are not exceptionally different from modern and Western accounts of yetis and abominable snowmen. Rather than focus exclusively on the literal ape-man, this chapter will examine the history and use of a single *name* for this monster. What can it reveal, not only about the idea of monstrosity in Tibet but also about the nature of monstrosity itself? The Western study of *mi-go* is inextricably linked with the yeti, and thus with monstrosity. However, the Tibetan use of the term, and the history of the word itself, is largely ignored and seemingly little understood. Therefore, understanding the genesis and early application of this word is essential to understanding both its meaning and its relationship to Western formulations of monstrosity.

Using a variety of Tibetan texts, this chapter examines the meaning and broader social implications of the word *mi-go* and considers these otherwise unexamined historical and moral contexts. These texts reveal a wide array of related meanings; in its earliest uses *mi-go* indicates wildness, thievery, and immorality. Later medical texts use *mi-go* as the name of an (apparently familiar) ape-like creature known in the Tibetan medical tradition, and some contemporary Himalayan folktales also describe a creature rather than a lawless human. Ultimately, these disparate uses of *mi-go* all revolve around the condition of being near, or adjacent, to humanity—of being something that has violated an essential rule or norm of humanity. Framed this way as an essential transgression of normative humanity, *mi-go* provides insight into Tibetan conceptions of human nature.

Conversely, by ignoring the multifaceted meaning of *mi-go* Western scholars have lost access to a subtle moral examination of human nature. Historical

Western engagement with mi-go (specifically yetis) has largely ignored any critical analysis of Himalayan attitudes and philosophies regarding the types of creatures we deem to be “monsters.” This omission is consistent with a general tendency to exoticize and generally other Tibetans and the Himalayas; from Lobsang Rampa’s friendly yetis, to Lovecraft’s unspeakable alien fungi, endemic perspectives are ignored utterly.

Mi-go—like many types of monsters—signals a rupture, or transgression, of important social orders. The borders and liminal realms mi-go occupy are many, and are all interconnected with what it means to be—or fail to be—human. Significantly, the term mi-go is used *most often* to talk about humans, particularly in early translations from Sanskrit texts where it is used specifically to translate the word *caura* (thieving/thievery). In these contexts mi-go is used to describe barbaric or uncivilized behavior broadly: The incivility of excessive laughter, lack of meditative focus, the moral transgression of theft, are all understood as mi-go, as violations of a normative social order that governs what is acceptable and human. In short, mi-go—whether it refers to human that acts like a beast or a beast that is nearly human—denotes a monstrous, or socially transgressive, wildness. Understood in this sense, the mi-go provides valuable data for monster theory as a case study in the social function of a monstrous being from the Tibetan imaginary. More importantly, it opens the door to questions about the Tibetan understanding of what it means to be human.

MI-GO IN TIBETAN LITERATURE AND CULTURE

Before looking at examples of how mi-go has been used in Tibetan literature and comparing these to theories of monstrosity, it is important to understand the more subtle historical elements of the construction of the word. Especially important is the element of the word that implies the monstrous separation or violation of the human, the component of the word that makes it monstrous: *go*. “Go” indicates wildness and a lack of control; it is often amended to the names of animals to indicate undomesticated varieties. For example, yak (*g. yak*) and yak-go (*g.yak rgod*) distinguish domesticated and wild yaks respectively; *go* is also used in this way to describe wild-growing medical herbs (*rgod sman*) (Bialik 2018, 454–5).

Early uses of “go” conflate wildness with bravery and a professional soldier class in ancient Tibetan society.¹ A telling phrase from the Tibetan Imperial period (seventh to ninth centuries) refers to the “weak and the strong” (*rgod dan g.yud*) (Bialik 2018, 455). The influence of these early meanings can be seen in contemporary uses of mi-go as a descriptor for brave men and fierce warriors. “It appears that *go* as an adjective was used in OT

[Old Tibetan] sources in relation to human beings only in a clearly defined meaning ‘aggressive fierce’” (Bialik 2018, 456). This notion of ferocity and aggression takes on a more critical tone when amended to “mi,” though there are contemporary examples of mi-go used to indicate fierceness and bravery as positive traits,² the word tends to equate the fierceness with the lack of humanity or domesticity.

A particularly interesting and significant early use of the word mi-go in this context is found in the *Aryacaurividyānasananamadhāraṇī* (*The Dhāraṇī that Utterly Subdues Mi-go*), a short sūtra surviving only in Tibetan translation in the Buddhist canons, which contains a *dhāraṇī*—or short magical incantation—and accompanying ritual for subduing thieves, brigands, or otherwise wild men. The text opens with the Buddha and his principal attendant Ānanda traveling through the mountains of Videha:

I pay homage to all the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. Thus have I heard: At that time the Bhagavan was traveling with his attendant Ananda, going to Videha (Easternmost Continent). In the distance Ananda saw a horde of mi-go, a sight so fearful his hair stood on end. So, the Bhagavan spoke, saying: “Hear me and be purified mi-go. Hearing this you shall arrive at bliss, it is the Bhagavan who speaks, and bestows these words. Ananda, you are afraid of these mi-go? This statement of the Bhagavan is for when you are afraid, when those gone to bliss feel afraid. When these words are bestowed Ananda, you *will* overcome fear. Ananda! Now all within ten leagues are utterly controlled/subdued, the guards, all of the mi-go townspeople who live in the mountain spaces/valleys, all the guards of the narrow crevices of the mountain. Hearing these words they bend their knees and are filled with remorse—stiffened and paralyzed. In this way the turning of the wheel of samsara is [made] like stone, in this way the turning of the wheel is transformed/magically halted and paralyzed. Like the quivering/moving mi-go, transform! Transform and halt. Transform confusion/bewilderment. Until one takes refuge they will not transform and will remain unliberated—like a knot.” These words the Bhagavan said, bestowing them on Ayushmat Ananda. These words of the Bhagavan evidently deserve praise (Mi rgod nam ‘joms 1971).

The final part of the text is a short occult prescription,³ providing the reader with a ritual they can perform to avoid falling into a similar situation as described in the sūtra. To “bind the mi-go,” one treats donkey hair with asafetida (the dried latex of the *Ferula* plant, used in regional cooking and medicine) before weaving it into thread. A woman must perform the weaving; she cannot be menstruating and must first undergo a ritual purification. The thread is then made into a cloth, the end of it is cut off, and the spell is complete.

What needs to be remembered is that these mi-go are distinctly and clearly human; they are not ape-men or yetis or literal monsters, but they are people. And while they may be brave and fierce, they are also seen as malevolent, less than human. In the text, mi-go is used to refer to *all* of the villagers who occupied the remote mountain passage Ānanda and the Buddha passed through. These mi-go are bands and families of thieves, and the binding words the Buddha recites paralyzes all of the members of the mountain city of these thieves. It is worth noting here the relation between thievery, wilderness, and living on borders and far-off places. This text establishes a number of the standard elements of mi-go, specifically, their immorality and dwelling outside conventional borders. It also brings the early brave and fierce implications into conversation with human nature; the actions of mi-go are so ulterior to the principals that organize human life they have ceased to be human.

The sūtra and its mantra of protection and binding inspired a tradition of tantric rites for binding mi-go. These rites are scattered throughout tantric traditions, but are generally mantras and related occult operations with the purpose of protecting travelers on journeys through the wilderness, “binding” would-be thieves (mi-go) in place. In the *Dpal E ka dza ti khrag gi rba klong gi rgyud* (*Ekajati’s Whirlpool of Blood Tantra*) a tantric compendium devoted to the goddess Ekajaṭī one finds exactly these binding rites: travelers are instructed to seal themselves in the center of a pen in an empty field and chant a Sanskrit mantra to ensure they are not accosted during their travels through the lands of mi-go⁴ (*Dpal E ka dza ti khrag gi rba klong gi rgyud*, 432.7-460.3). These spells are largely in line with the material in the sūtra, presenting the mi-go as a human being engaged in inhuman behaviors. They tend to allude specifically to travelers and traveling, and situate the mi-go in desolate areas. These mi-go endanger people and similarly violate normative moral and organizational standards necessary for human culture as we know it.

In contrast to the *The Dhāranī that Utterly Subdues Mi-go*, the mi-go found in certain medical texts is clearly a nonhuman being. Instead of an abstract label or moral repudiation, it is understood as a being with a physical, animal existence. The earliest references to mi-go as a literal monster occur in seventeenth and eighteenth-century medical texts. Tibetan medicine and Buddhist doctrine explicitly acknowledge and involve preternatural or “mythical” beings, but the mi-go is distinctly physical in these texts, treated often as a conventional animal, and not a numinous, spiritual being. Its flesh, blood, and furs are understood as physically substantial enough to be included in practical guides for doctors and pharmacists.

The *Shel gong shel phreng* (*The Crystal Ball and The Crystal Rosary*) (Bstan ‘dzin phun tshogs 1970) is a set of two books consisting of a listing of the principal *materia medica* and an auto-commentary explaining the

use, appearance, and nature of these substances. Written in the seventeenth century by physician Tenzin Phuntsok, these books document the plant, animal, and inanimate, substances employed in the treatment of disease and production of medicine. The “flesh” (*sha*) chapter begins with the section describing the appropriate medical uses of human flesh. Human flesh is said to be good for alleviating “ulcerations, tumors, and malignant cancers of the skin and other illnesses of the gDon [an illness bringing spirit] wind (rlung)” (Bstan ‘dzin phun tshogs, 400). The following section lists a variety of “wild” animals, beginning with mi-go and including lions, tigers, bears, wild (*rgod*) pig and wild (*rgod*) goat, vultures, crows, and ravens: “These various meats dispel gDon caused sickness (*gdon nad*)” (400). Fortunately, this brief reference is expanded on: it has been illustrated explicitly in medical manuals designed to aid physicians in identification and proper application of medical substances.

Mi-go, therefore, are described and illustrated in medical texts and commentaries, alongside primates, herbs, and exotic birds. Here they are animals, connected intimately with humanity, but explicitly apart. An undomesticated variant of human, wild and only partly recognizable, in appearance and behavior, as somehow like us. Notably, the *Dri med shel gong shel phreng* (*The Pure Crystal Ball and Rosary*) provides illustrations of the substances and animals enumerated in the earlier text *The Crystal Ball and The Crystal Rosary*. This book, therefore, would have been an extraordinarily practical tool for a Himalayan physician potentially unfamiliar with obscure Indian and Chinese flora and fauna. *The Pure Crystal Ball and Rosary*’s entry on the mi-go reads as follows:

Mi-go are shaped like humans or [members of] the bear family. They live on mountains. They are large and very strong. It is known that their flesh is beneficial for the treatment of illnesses caused by the gDon [spirits]. Their flesh clears away imbalances of bile, and other illnesses of the liver. (Ye shes bstan pa’i rgyal mtshan 1971, 228)

While the earlier uses of mi-go morally castigate human beings as behaving inhumanely, the mi-go referenced in medical texts is an actual inhuman creature, a literal monster. This use symbolically compounds all of the implications we have seen mi-go carry up till now, border dwelling, norm challenging, uncivilized behavior, all made flesh: Here, this “monstrous” mi-go transforms what had historically been presented as cultural otherness into biological otherness.

There is one contemporary folktale regarding the mi-go that is especially important to touch on, not only because of its evident longevity and

geographic distribution but also because it embodies the essential properties of the monstrous mi-go. In each of its versions, the mi-go are depicted as liminal beings, imitating humans while living on the borders of human settlements. They mimic and steal, and *try* to be human, but their disorderly attempts result in them stealing from the farmers and damaging their livelihood. The folktale tends to be used to explain what “happened” to the mi-go, and why people either do not see them or only see them very rarely. One particular account of the folktale, recorded on a Chinese website devoted to Tibetan culture (zw.tibetculture.org), describes the origin of the name of a lake on a nature preserve, but the lake itself seems to have been added to the folk tale later, ostensibly to explain the name of the eponymous lake (*mi rgod mtsho*). The lake in Garze, Sichuan, now called Mugecuo, is part of a large complex of nature preserves and natural springs.

Once, long ago a tribe of mi-go lived on the back of a mountain, in a plain, near a farmland called gu (*‘agu*). Every year the land was tended by humans, in the spring the fields were planted and in the summer they were weeded. Then, in the autumn, when it was time to gather the harvest, the mi-go would copy what they had seen the farmers doing, and would pluck the sprouts from the field before the farmers could pick them. This caused the farmers’ harvest to be greatly reduced. One day the common men of the town got together and hatched a plan. They filled up large pots with beer, and some with honey and pork fat. Then taking up wooden swords and preparing some bundles they then went to the plains [where the mi-go dwelt] and pretended to drink from the jugs and became drunk, they smeared their mouths with only a fly’s mouthful-worth of sticky animal-fat honey *chaang* (beer). Then, in the field, they brandished their wooden swords, pretending to fight one another, before dropping to the ground, and playing dead. Soon, they secretly snuck back to their town, leaving behind the bundles they had prepared, filled with real swords—not wooden ones. The mi-go did not know any better than to emulate the men, they accepted the deception of the men, and imitated it themselves. So, they drank the beer and the honey and fat. One by one the mi-go, having really drunk from the vessels became intoxicated. They then found the bundles that the men had left in the fields, and found the real swords, which they took up and began to swing. However, their eyes were daubed shut by the honey and animal fat they had consumed. They blindly swung their swords and killed each other—all except the chief of the mi-go tribe. The chief, seeing what had happened to his tribe, was overcome with emotion, and realizing he was about to cry sat atop a large rock and wept (this boulder is not far from *Bzhung bra aha*). He remained there, weeping, and his tears flowed into the gu plains, filling them and making a lake. Ever since then, because of these events, humans have called the lake, which is presently the town of Dartsedo

(famous for its sightseeing) the *mi rgod mtsho*, mi-go lake. (“Mi rgod mtsho yig gtam rgyud,” n.d.)

A similar account is found in a letter written by the Tibetologist and aristocrat Prince Peter of Greece and Denmark. This account only features the first part of the story, and does not include the origin of the lake’s name, the crying mi-go chieftain, or any overt geographic reference at all:

A few days before Christmas 1951, Prince Peter of Greece sent a letter to the *Calcutta Statesman*. . . . He described some peculiar events that took place in a village close to Jalap La, in Sikkim. Having noticed that a yeti was frequently coming to drink water from their trough, the villagers filled it with *chang*—the local rice beer—instead of water. They were thus able to capture the drunken being and, after tying it up, they headed down south, intending to bring it to Kalimpong to exhibit it. But their plans changed abruptly when the yeti, sober again, was able to break the ropes and escape along the way. According to Prince Peter, the being was a monkey, and it might have provided some clues that would help answer puzzling questions posed by the famous and mysterious footprints found and photographed by Shipton during his 1951 Everest Expedition. (Sawerthal and Torri 2017, 131)

There is a third example of this story in an account from Shinya Lama Punyavajra, the third chief lama of the Boudhnath Stupa in Kathmandu (Nath 1994, 98), though this one is much briefer, and like the account Prince Peter provided, does not contain the ending section describing the formation of the lake. We see in all of these stories the same concern with wildness and civilization, with appropriate behavior and conflict on the outskirts of human society. These monstrous concerns are the core of the meaning of mi-go: near-human wildness, and social transgression.

Ultimately, mi-go in all of its Himalayan meanings speaks to the liminal space in-between humans and animals, wildness and social order. The mi-go is *not* a mi (human), but it must be *more* mi than a yak or a crow—after all, these animals don’t have mi in their names. If they are undomesticated or particularly dangerous they may have a go, but they are not *so* closely connected with humanity as to have it in their own names. Every time mi-go is used it is used to describe people or things that are *like* people, but that have in some way violated or transgressed the basic rules of humanity, and so fail to really *be* human. In this way, mi-go tells us, among other things, what it means to be human, to be civilized, and how important limits, borders, and normative order is to our shared humanity.

MI-GO, TRANSGRESSION, MONSTROSITY, AND WILDMEN

In *Ten Theses on Monsters and Monstrosity*, Allen S. Weiss (2004, 194) writes, “Monsters are indicators of epistemic shifts.” In this sense, monstrosity represents change or violation of conventionally accepted knowledge and wisdom. So, monsters represent transgressions and violations of accepted norms, moral standards, socio-cultural values, biology, and so on: The deformed “monster” of premodern medical teratology is a transgression of “healthy” physiology, the zombie is a violation of the duality of life and death, the sphinx or satyr is a challenge to conventional zoology. Monsters as symbols of social change, and thus transgression, are understood to be living, physical, violations of accepted natural and moral orders and law. They, by definition, straddle the norms and limits, the rules by which we live and organize our lives. Theorist Jeffrey Jerome Cohen expands on the role of the monster as “indicator” or symbol, pointing out that the monster is filled with cultural information:

The monstrous body is pure culture. A construct and a projection, the monster exists only to be read: the *monstrum* is etymologically “that which reveals,” “that which warns,” a glyph that seeks a hierophant. Like a letter on the page, the monster signifies something other than itself: it is always a displacement, always inhabits the gap between the time of upheaval that created it and the moment into which it is received, to be born again. (Cohen 1997, 4)

Monsters are typically made *monstrous* by failing or violating one or more human norms or dictums: Too tall, too short, an unnatural combination or number of limbs, conjoined twins, too animalistic, too violent, too prone to laughter, incivility, cannibalism; the monster represents or enacts a transgression of our lived human norms through its behaviors and appearance. Monsters transgress norms and by violating them they function to establish normativity. Normativity, in philosopher Lorraine Daston’s words, “is the quality of telling us what *should* be, as opposed to describing how things are.” Human culture opposes theft, moves toward organization, and demands a degree of domesticity. Daston goes on to assert the universality of norms for humanity: “There is no known human culture, past or present, without any norms at all” (Daston 2019, 46). This is why understanding the history, nature, and implications of mi-go’s specific violations of normativity is important: it tells us far more about humanity than it does about yetis or thieves.

In the folk tale above, the mi-go try to teach themselves to be human, but it is actually the mi-go who teach us how *not* to be human. All things

called mi-go engage in some kind of violation of the normative bounds of human behavior, morality, and civility. As such they personify wildness or the inverse of human social order, which seeks to domesticate and civilize, to live in centralized settlements away from wild or unkempt borders. As wild beings, the mi-go show civilized humans what not to do and be, demonstrating the limits of their social lives.

In social function points to a connection between mi-go and a Western monster tradition: the wildman. The wildman is the name used to describe a culturally and geographically widespread “species” of monster: a humanlike thing, covered in fur, active on the outskirts of human culture. The wildman lives on the limits of society—sometimes human, sometimes animal—feasting on human flesh, foraging nourishment, and garbage (Dudley 1973, 7). The wildman, as a monster, also tells us about the limits of humanity and human norms: the limits of our settlements and civilizations, the edges of our accepted behaviors—even the limits of our human appearance. The wildman does not utterly violate these norms, but transgresses them *just* enough to draw our attention to them. They live on the margins of our society, not in space or beneath the ocean; they imitate our social behaviors; they are not wholly alien, but drink beer and raise children. Even in their appearance they are discernibly human like, but more hirsute. The wildman is a clear neighbor, an ancestor, and the fears and judgments the wildman provokes as a monster are therefore distinctly *human* fears. Like the mi-go the wildness of the wildman can be understood as “belonging to a set of culturally self-authenticating devices . . . they do not so much refer to a specific thing, place, or condition as dictate a particular attitude” (Dudley 1973, 7). In this case, the attitude is one of acceptable or normative humanity, the basic set of fluid norms and rules humanity relies on.

Wildman is a good option for a literal translation of mi-go; it connects the word and related monster to a wider monster tradition while roughly translating “undomesticated human.” However, this translation occludes much of the historical and social information provided, and would seem to be less relevant for the thieves and brigands of the *sūtras* and *tantras*. Like the mi-go, wildmen live on boundaries, and represent violations of normative human order with their essential wildness. Wildness is what makes wildmen, and mi-go, monsters; this un-domesticity is a confrontation of human form and animal behavior, of the near-limits of the human social world. In *Myths of the Dog-man* David Gordon White (1991, 27) opines, “The Wildman almost always represents the image of the man released from social control, the man in whom libidinal impulses have gained full ascendancy.” In the same way, mi-go always denotes or implies transgressive wildness in opposition to normative humanity—whether as a literal monster or not—there is a perennial incivility and transgression of normative social order encoded in all uses of mi-go.

CONCLUSION

From disparate examples across the Himalayas and hundreds of years of textual tradition a clearer picture of humanity's collective concern and fear of violations of civility, and the boundaries of human life this fear implies, emerges. Wherever *mi-go* occurs, it occurs in close proximity to humanity. The monstrosity of yetis and *mi-go* is a lack of culture, an uncanny failure of something otherwise very human to ultimately be human, or for something human to stop or fail at human behavior. This is clearly evinced in the many interrelated uses of *mi-go* in the texts reviewed above. Throughout these uses, *mi-go* is consistently linked to a particular kind of violation of a normative order, always indicating a transgression of the boundaries of human social and behavioral norms. In this way, even when used in a rare positive context, like fierce or brave, *mi-go* still retains the implication of inhumanity and monstrosity. *Mi-go* speaks to the monstrous wildness that stands in contrast to the typical and acceptable in human life; it is the violation of the normative standards by which we define our humanity.

While largely ignored in Western research and theory this broader role of *mi-go*, as an indicator of transgression and near-humanity, is evident when examined in its traditional contexts in Tibetan literature and culture. It is important to note that the disparate textual examples presented in this chapter are from a fairly limited, though still neglected, corpus: Tibetan literature. This research has not taken into account non-Tibetan textual canons, or the innumerable oral traditions throughout the Himalayas currently mythologizing and theorizing *mi-go*. Yet even this limited selection of texts reveals a historically consistent meaning. A meaning that aligns well with Western attitudes surrounding the idea of monstrosity and monsters analyzed above but is otherwise inaccessible or ignored in existing scholarship. From its earliest uses and old Tibetan origins as an indicator of bravery, wildness, and later of theft and barbarous behavior, *mi-go* draws a line in the sand between the acceptable and human, and the uncivilized, wild, and barbarous. The later, and more familiar, *mi-go* of medical manuals and monster stories retains this meaning, symbolically embodying the limits of humanity in a near-human creature.

This is an important point of congruence between Tibetan and Western attitudes toward transgressions of social and moral boundaries. *Mi-go* clearly fulfills a very similar role in Tibetan thought as the wildmen and monsters defined in the Western theory discussed above. However, this role has gone largely unaddressed, with Western scholars and explorers only presenting and projecting their existing convictions and beliefs, while actively excluding centuries of existing local theory. In these scholarly works *mi-go* is at best roughly translated, generally alongside lists of other Himalayan names for

“the yeti,” a term that will also go undefined and unexamined. As the Tibetan sources presented above reveal, the meanings and uses of these otherwise unexamined names constitute discrete theories of morality and humanity. These theories, overlooked in favor of existing Western notions of “cryptids” and “missing links,” provide subtle and valuable insights into the nature of humanity and morality as gleaned by Tibetan and Himalayan authors. These insights are clearly valuable ones, articulating many points of similarity between the intellectual traditions. Not least of which is the similarity between the uses of *mi-go* and monster which, in their perspective contexts, mean very similar things.

Like the term monstrosity, the term *mi-go* conveys a moral judgment, highlighting elements that fail to cohere with order, civility, and domesticity. Yetis and raucous laughter, and anything else *mi-go*, can all be thought of as monstrous because of how *close* to us they are. This recognition also tells us something about the nature of humanity: it highlights the central importance of normativity and domesticity in human civilization. *Mi-go* represents the symbolic violation of the norms of domesticated humanity.

So, *mi-go* certainly tells us something about Tibetan and Western ideas of monsters and humans, how disparate people observe and address similar transgressions and norms. But most significantly, *mi-go* tells us something about ourselves. It tells us something subtle, and perhaps unsettling, about human nature, and how close we all really are to inhumanity, to the collapse of our values and norms. To modify David Gordon White’s (1991, 27) assertion quoted above, that “The Wildman almost always represents the image of the man released from social control” I would assert that the *mi-go* represents this image as well. Every *mi-go* is only a few transgressions away from the human; this is equally true for us humans, who are closer than it seems to a wild monstrosity kept at bay only by our collective acquiescence to human norms.

NOTES

1. In old Tibetan legal texts *go* is also used to refer to a professional military class, for example the “*rgod* of a hill fort” (Bialek 2018, 456), is used to identify the commander of a particular fortification.

2. For example, the martial arts master *Klu bum Mi rgod*, eponymous protagonist of a popular Tibetan Wushu novel (Nag po skal bzang 2013).

3. “This is the ritual: Mix *asafoetida* with donkey’s hair [to make threads], and have a clean [ritually pure] woman spin the thread, while reciting twenty-one times the aforementioned [text]. When done [making the cloth] cut/discard the knot at

the end, then untie the separated knot. This is the Siddhi” (Mi rgod rnam ‘joms 1971, 306).

4. A similar binding rite is found in another Tantric compendium of Ekajaṭī, *The Collected Wrathful Tantras of Ekajaṭī* (*Ral gcig ma’i drag sngags ‘dus pa’i rgyud*, 92.2-102.2), while a translation of a mi-go binding ritual in the Tārā tradition can be found in Stephen Beyer’s *Magic and Ritual in Tibet* (1973, 209).